

Delightfully clever and fresh! Dodrill dazzles with endearing characters in this cozy mystery. Heartwarming yet intriguing at the same time, I couldn't put the book down until the last word.

— Mary Vee, *The Storyteller*

Who knew birding could be such a deadly hobby? Certainly not me.

Jennifer Dodrill has captured what, for me, is the ideal spirit of the cozy mystery—plenty of mystery peppered with page-turning tension, exciting twists and turns, and laugh-out-loud humor.

A thoroughly enjoyable cozy for every mystery fan. Watch out for Hazel; she's quite the character. Looking forward to more in the Empty-nesters Cozy Mystery series.

— Debra L. Butterfield, author of *Claiming Her Inheritance*

*Bird's Alive!* is a cozy mystery with elements of suspense, humor, intrigue, and a hint of possible romance. Ms. Dodrill is an excellent writer and her main character, Peg, is well-developed and relatable to women readers.

Supporting characters provide plenty of conflict, frustration, and comic relief for the widowed empty-nester who blogs. Sticking with the theme of birding, Ms. Dodrill has Peg decide to start a bird-watching club. When a member of her group dies, the feathers will fly. I highly recommend this author and her first book in this series. The story is quite entertaining and will keep you wondering 'who done it.'

— Bettie Boswell, Author Christian  
Romances: *On Cue, Free to Love, Hoping for  
Treasure, Hidden Names* Christian Children's  
Books: *Lucy and Thunder, Dottie's Dream Horse, I  
Love Mom: Our Hero*

# Birds Alive!

An Empty-nesters Cozy Mystery: Book 1



# Jen Dodrill



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*To the Rock, my Cornerstone, thank You. Without You, I am  
nothing.*





## Chapter 1

I could write blog posts and headings, research keywords, and create printables for my Mamma Birds blog readers. In. My. Dreams.

Not today, though. My hands tangled in my curls as the blinking cursor mocked me, and my mind remained a void. Sticky notes with ideas and theme words jotted on them covered the table. I squirmed in my chair.

“Something inspire me. Please.” I resisted tearing out my hair and searched online for quotes instead.

A comment by a popular columnist had me thumbing tears from my eyes. Her comparison of being an empty nester to serving as Vice President of the United States described my life. Me, Peg Howard, VP of useless moms. My nest was empty.

“But your heart is full,” my cheerleading, energetic mom readers would say.

*My heart is full, but it hurts. I'm lonely being alone.*

I wrapped up the post. “This Mamma Bird has been a parent for twenty-six years. Even though all the baby birds have moved out, I’m still a mom. First, Chloe got married, then Cynthia joined the Navy, and now Carter is off to college. Poof,

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gone. What does a Mamma Bird do when the chicks fly? It's time to figure out what's next. Any suggestions are welcome."

My words whooshed into the blogosphere, and I leaned back, stretching my neck side-to-side, hopeful my faithful readers would come up with a great idea. Left to my own desperate devices, I would end up a crazy cat lady.

*And we all know how that would turn out.*



THE FOLLOWING DAY, I stood on my back deck, clutching a mug of steaming dark roast coffee, and watched the birds. My favorite time was early morning—before the late August humidity made my curly hair unmanageable. Red-wing blackbirds swooped to snack from a square, flat feeder hung on a shepherd's crook. Mourning doves scrounged on the ground for feed spilled from the squirrel-buster feeder. The top on it was loose again. I loved squirrels, but they would eat me out of house and sunflower seeds.

I curled up on a chair and closed my eyes, letting the Florida sun warm my face. My prayers were silent, and tears trickled down my cheeks.

Last night showed me how hard my new life would be. I wandered the house, straightened pictures, and fluffed couch pillows. A peek into Carter's room sent me scurrying out after seeing the mess he had left behind. I didn't want to tackle that.

I sat up, sipped my coffee, and sighed. "Today is a clean slate, full of opportunities."

"Peg, talking to yourself is fine. If you answer, we have a problem." Lauree's voice startled me. She leaned over her deck railing, her travel mug raised in salute.

"Ha-ha, you're funny." I waved her over. "Come sit with me."



My next-door neighbor, best friend, and social media manager for Mamma Birds navigated through her backyard. Toys lay strewn on her lawn, and one swing tangled around the other on their wooden play set. She ignored it all and tiptoed past a deflated kiddie pool before she crossed my bare yard and climbed the steps to my deck. She gathered her long brown curls in one hand, secured them with a hair tie, and dropped into a chair beside me.

“Two questions.” She scrunched up her nose. “First, have you seen the comments on your post?”

“Which one? Yesterday’s?”

“Oh yeah. It’s crazy.” She crossed her legs and settled back in her chair. “The Mamma Birds are worried you’re leaving. I answered a few comments, but you need to deal with this. And soon.”

My shoulders slumped. “I’m not going anywhere. My life was so different thirteen years ago. Now, it’s changed, and maybe I need to consider another career.” I stared at the trees. Birds twittered in the branches, and squirrels played, running up and down the trunks. “But I’m not leaving Mamma Birds. It’s, well, like that part of my life is over. I can’t relate to young moms anymore. Does that make sense?” I hated the whine in my voice.

“Sure. It’s defined you for years. Since Zack died.”

“Yep. Thank goodness for his life insurance, or the kids and I would have starved until the blog caught on.” I held up my hands and shrugged. “What do I do now?”

She handed me her cell phone. “Let’s start with these comments.”

Several committed readers had already left suggestions for a new career, including opening a motorcycle shop and starting a catering business, or expressed worry Mamma Birds would shut down.

“I haven’t seen this kind of reaction since you wrote that post on vaccines.” Her amber eyes lit with mirth.

“Vaccines are a polarizing issue,” I mumbled and handed her the phone. “Let me grab my laptop and answer some of these. Can you put a statement out on social media?”

I headed inside, scooped up my computer, and returned to the deck, sliding the glass door closed. Florida critters would scurry in unless I pulled it tight. I wasn’t in the mood to chase frogs, crickets, or any other creatures around the house.

Lauree bent over her phone, thumbs tapping out a response. She read the message out loud. “Anything you want to add?”

“That’s fine. Last night gave me a glimpse into what my life will be like. Rough and no fun.” I settled in my chair and opened my laptop. “It’s hard to believe I’m all alone. This part of my life wasn’t supposed to be like this.” My words ended in a whisper.

She leaned over and patted my leg. “I can’t imagine. John and I may never be alone. I snuck out this morning while he fed the twins and got them ready for school. We’ll be in our sixties before they leave home.”

Her twins had just started second grade, and I loved them as my own. They adored squirrels and didn’t understand why I didn’t want to feed all the bushy-tailed, four-legged rodents in northwest Florida. It crossed my mind they might have loosened the top of the bird feeder.

I shook my head, discarding the thought, and forced a cheerful note into my voice. Whining wasn’t helping either of us. “What’s your other question?”

“Have you checked the weather? Hazel is forming. It’s a tropical depression, but it’s predicted to become a hurricane soon.”

“Hazel? That’s my mother-in-law’s name.” I wiggled my

eyebrows. “She is a bit of a hurricane—blowing in and out and leaving a mess. Plus, that dog and parakeet of hers.” I shivered.

Lauree giggled.

Hurricanes didn’t worry me much since my house sat north of Interstate 10. Tornados or high winds were the bigger concern. I needed to find my emergency kit, stuffed somewhere in the pantry, and refill it.

I opened my blog’s admin page and scrolled through, replying to followers asking questions. “Hey, check out this idea.” I slid my laptop to her and stood. “Want more coffee?”

She jiggled her mug, gave it to me, and bent over the laptop. I watched her through the glass door while refilling our mugs, sure to screw her travel cup top on tight. At one point, she sat up straight and tipped her head. I picked up both cups, opened the sliding door, and set her coffee on the table. “What do you think?”

“It’s brilliant.” She squealed. “Perfect timing.”



THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST FLORIDA was a ten-minute drive from my house. I had an alumni pass for the pool and knew there was a clubhouse bulletin board for flyers. Lauree and I created one with little tear-offs at the bottom that included my phone number. I tacked the flyer up and waited for the calls to roll in.

Seven people called, but only two men and three women showed up for the kick-off meeting of The Empty Nesters Birding Group. Scheduling it for the night after Labor Day might have been a mistake, but I didn’t want to delay my new adventure. Hazel gathered strength off the east coast of south Texas and reached hurricane status that day, which might have played a part in the low attendance, although most Floridians were lackadaisical about anything below a Cat Three.

“Welcome! Come on in!” I greeted each person and pointed them to the kitchen island for coffee, small bottles of water, and chocolate chip cookies. “Help yourself and take a seat.”

“I’m glad you started this,” said a slender blonde who introduced herself as Carmen. She fiddled with her gaudy diamond wedding band. “I don’t know much about birds, but this sounded fun.” She wobbled to the island on her high heels, scrunched her nose at the cookies, and grabbed a mug of black coffee. She turned to me. “I think your blog is terrific. It’s great how you stay-at-home moms create things.”

“Um, thank you.” I avoided eye contact with Lauree. Carmen’s “mom” comment would have her blood boiling.

When my clock cuckooed seven times, I clapped my hands and joined my fellow birders-to-be in the living room. “Thanks for coming. Let’s start the meeting.”

A knock sounded, and Lauree opened the front door to our last birder. I waved at her and continued. “You don’t have to be an empty nester in this group. I wanted to meet people my age and stage of life. And you don’t have to be a birder already. Let’s introduce ourselves. Then we’ll decide how we want to do things.”

Excitement bubbled up inside of me.

Carmen glanced at the others and raised her hand. “I’ll go first.” She stood, smoothed her skirt, and passed out business cards as she told us about her career as a real estate agent. Lauree cocked an eyebrow and cleared her throat.

“Thanks, Carmen.” I butted in on her long-winded spiel. “Who’s next? Sylvia, tell us a little about yourself.”

Sylvia, a reserved-looking woman closing in on her mid-sixties, was tall and thin with a bird beak of a nose and graying hair tied up in a bun. “I brought lists tonight.” She passed copies around the room. “This shows birds common to the area. I’ve been birding for years. My daughter, Charlene, used

to go with me back when this part of Pensacola was undeveloped. The protected wetlands behind your house, Peg, made this a popular place for birds before they built this subdivision.”

“Wow.” I glanced at her handout. “Thank you, Sylvia. This is super helpful. And each bird’s name has a box next to it. It’s like a scavenger hunt, isn’t it?”

Her brown eyes sparkled. “Yes!”

“I have several feeders out back and recognize a few of my visitors.” I flapped the piece of paper. “This will help me identify more.”

“You probably get raccoons and lots of squirrels, don’t you?” She took her seat.

I gave a toothy smile. “I know what those are, though.”

The older man in our group chuckled and stood. “I’ll go. My name is Owen. I’m a retired history professor at UWF.” His bald head glistened in the overhead lights. “I’m an empty nester and a widower. My wife died three years ago, and learning something new sounded fun. The only birds I’m familiar with are seagulls and cardinals.” He winked at me.

“I’m a widow. Thirteen years.” *What am I doing?* My cheeks burned. Sharing information like this wasn’t me. Even though I strived for “real” life on my blog, I was more reticent in person.

He gave an understanding nod and took his seat.

The other man stood, raking his fingers through his buzz-cut, salt-and-pepper hair. “I’m Shortie.”

Lauree snorted. He wasn’t short, standing well over six feet tall, with broad shoulders that carried an air of power and authority.

He chuckled. “Got the nickname at boot camp, and it stuck. Thirty years later, I still introduce myself that way. My real name’s Winston, but I go by Shortie.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets. “I retired from the

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Navy military police force a few months ago, and I'm bored." He blew out a breath. "My bird knowledge isn't much better than Owen's. My daughter works at the pool at UWF, and she saw the announcement and forced me to come." He sat. "Next."

We all stared at our last empty nester. She remained curled on her chair and offered a brief wave. "I'm Anna." A slight woman with long brown hair and a nervous air, she'd scurried to her seat when she came in, staying still and quiet. I leaned toward her, waiting for more.

Realizing she wouldn't contribute any other information, I chirped, "My name is Peg, and my youngest son just left for the University of South Alabama in Mobile, making me an official empty nester." I gestured to Owen. "As I said, I'm a widow. Discovering more about birds and finding friends are two of the reasons why I started the group. A blog reader suggested this as a new hobby, and it sounded fun." I pointed to Lauree. "This is my neighbor and close friend, Lauree. She's helping me out for tonight."

She wiggled her fingers in greeting.

A glance around the room sent a tentative hope fluttering inside my belly. No more whining. The Empty Nesters Birding Group would help me out of my slump.



LAUREE STAYED to help clean up. She'd come to meet the birders and make sure they passed her character check. I waited for her observations. My friend wasn't snarky, but she could read people.

She wiped cookie crumbs off the island into the trash can. I leaned against the kitchen counter, watching her.

"What?"

“Nothing, just waiting on your assessment. Any creepos?”

“Not creepos.” She washed her hands and dried them on the kitchen towel before spreading it out to dry.

“But?”

“Well.” She held up a hand and counted on each finger. “Carmen is interesting, Sylvia is amazing, Owen seems lonely, Shortie is hot, and what’s up with Anna?”

I imitated her countdown. “Not all real estate agents are as unique as Carmen. Sylvia is going to teach us about birding. Owen is kind. I agree about Shortie. And Anna is a mystery.”

She hugged me before heading for the front door. “This is why we’re friends.” She stepped out onto the porch. Leaning back in, she said, “Can’t wait for you to get to know Shortie better. No wedding ring, FYI.” She pulled the door shut.

I locked it behind her, closed the back door blinds, and set the house alarm. As I drifted to sleep, I chuckled again about her Shortie comment. Then Anna’s face came to mind. She didn’t seem to fit in with the group. I’d make a point to talk to her on our first birding trip Saturday. I turned over and pushed my pillow into shape. There was plenty of time to learn more about my new birding friends.